Socratic dialogue faces the history

Socratic Dialogue Faces the History

Dialogical Inquiry as Philosophical and Politically Engaged Way of Life

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Abstract

This essay will demonstrate the nexus between philosophical dialogue and political action by analyzing the work of Leonard Nelson and his disciples Gustav Heckman and Minna Specht. The central question is: "In which sense can a dialogical education be considered as a political action?" In the 1920s and 1930s, Nelson promoted Socratic dialogue amongst his students as a practice of freedom in opposition to the rising Nazi power. Nelson understood that to educate the new generation through a very participative model of philosophical inquiry that privileged critical thinking and autonomy was the best form of resistance. Minna Specht's idea of education for confidence gave to this dialogical practice a very innovative dimension, which led her to be engaged with UNESCO's educational programs in post-war Germany. In this way, the Socratic dialogue faced history.

Keywords

Socratic dialogue – Kant – Nelson – Specht – emotion – education – politics of care – philosophy as way of life

Introduction

How can a dialogical education be defined as a political action? To answer this question, I will compare the ancient Socratic method with the ways Leonard Nelson, Gustav Heckmann and Minna Specht have enacted it.[1] In particular, I will underline the traits shared by dialogical education and political action, including the philosophical dimension. I will consider the German formulation of the Socratic dialogue as this model is, even today, characterized by a fundamental element of political engagement. Arguably, the German formulation represents a good example to discuss the role of dialogue when facing historical challenges. Thus, analyzing Nelson and his disciples' biographies will also allow to comprehend the development of the German method – in both programmatic and factual terms – as a political action of resistance and struggle for freedom during National Socialism in Germany.

The Ancient Socratic Dialogue

In order to approach the above topics, it is first necessary to summarize the defining traits of the ancient Socratic dialogue. This essay will not cross-examine the epistemological features of the Socratic method,[2] since it is more relevant here to provide an account of the relevance of the method within the context of 5th/4th centuries BCE Athens. I will then be in a position to clarify in the section on "History and Dialogue" why the Socratic dialogue – as a philosophical practice developed later on by Nelson and others – faces the history.

The literary genre of *logoi sokratikoi* emerges immediately after Socrates' death in 399 BCE as a testimony of his life and philosophy. The first Platonic dialogues in this genre are clear examples of the philosophical practice that were popularized by Socrates, i.e., the dialogical inquiry. The method expresses not only the idea that knowledge should be pursued through dialogue, but also the notion of philosophy as a way of life that recognizes the moral and the political value of the achievement of knowledge.[3] Therefore, philosophy appears to be the best form of education since it trains the philosopher to achieve virtue through the dialogical process of knowledge enquiry.

In fact, Plato's Socratic dialogues emphasize the dialogical feature of the philosophical inquiry, employing a principal interlocutor (Socrates) who asks questions to seek definitions. A large number of Socrates' interlocutors are composed of sophists, rhetoricians and politicians – in other words, by the foremost historical characters of the period who were the leaders of the actual regime. Socrates, by enacting dialogic strategies that vary depending on the interlocutor, brings to light the inconsistency of their opinions and, simultaneously, the incoherency of their ways of life.

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1 The primary sources can be found here: Thomas Kite Brown, ed., *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy. Selected Essays by Leonard Nelson* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965); Gustav Heckmann, *Das sokratische Gespräch, Erfharungen in philosophischen Hochschulseminaren* [Socratic dialogue, experiences in high school classes], (Hannover: Schroedel, 1981); Leonard Nelson, *Gesammelte Schriften.* Vol.1: *Die Schule der kritischen Philosophie und ihre Methode* [Collected Writings. Vol.1: The School of Critical Philosophy and its Method], (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1970); Leonard Nelson, "*Die sokratische Methode. Vortrag, gehalten am 11. Dezember 1922 in der Pädagogischen Gesellschaft in Göttingen*" [The Socratic method. Lecture held on the 11th of December 1922 in the Pedagogical Society in Göttingen], in Otto Meyerhof, Franz Oppenheimer, Minna Specht, eds., *Abhandlungen der Fries'schen Schule. Neue Folge,* Band, H. 1 [Friesian School's memoirs. New Series, Volume, H. 1] (Göttingen: Öffentliches Leben, 1929) pp. 21–78; Minna Specht, *Education for confidence. A school in exile* (London: New Education fellowship, London 1944).

2 For a complete analysis of the different tools in play within the elenchus, see Laura Candiotto, *Le vie della confutazione. I dialoghi socratici di Platone* [Ways of refutation. Plato's Socratic dialogues], (Milano: Mimesis, 2012), "Aporetic State and Extended Emotions: the Shameful Recognition of Contradictions in the Socratic Elenchus", *Ethics & Politics*, XVII, 2015(2), pp. 233–248.

3 Pierre Hadot has underlied it for the Ancient Greek philosophy, especially for the Hellenistic Schools. See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

The listeners – both internal and external to the dialogue – could therefore realize that their representatives were not worthy of their social role. In particular, through this public process of refutation, which merges the achievement of self-awareness to a profound critique of current events, the Athenians could reflect upon the crises of their time and eventually decide to act in order to oppose and overcome it.

Furthermore, dialogue – in its Platonic approach – is displayed as this community of inquiry devoted to the acquisition of knowledge. In the *Seventh Letter*,[4] Plato depicted philosophical practice as the activity pursued in a community with friends, all of them having knowledge as their main goal. The intersubjective dimension of the inquiry leads, thus, to the achievement of knowledge through intellectual cooperation, and mutual support amongst the interlocutors is required in order to overcome the difficulties that may be faced in the process of inquiry. Consequently, dialogue is configured as a procedure that leads to the achievement of the knowledge of the Good, and is recognised as the most valuable thing.

Therefore, a dialogue is a social space where it is possible to recognize both one's errors and those committed by the representatives of the city; in the meantime, it is also the intellectual arrangement through which, thanks to the elenctic purification from false judgments,[5] it is possible to maieutically generate knowledge. Dialogical practice enables the participants to work upon themselves, to recognize the crises of their historical period, and to seek better strategies and lifestyles through the acquisition of knowledge. In his higher theoretical understanding, the dialogue assumes therefore a function of education to truth, which, according to Plato, is a constitutive element for the instruction not only of the philosophers, but of politicians as well.[6] Dialogical practice thus enables the interlocutors to recognize the crises of their historical period and, thanks to the discovery of truth, seek a better way of life for their community.

The German Socratic Dialogue

In this section, I will focus on the enactment of the Socratic dialogue in the contemporary period. The Socratic dialogue assumed various formulations through the years, especially in the Anglo-Saxon and north European settings, and it is presently considered as one of the main philosophical practices operative today. It is applied, amongst other settings, in education, training and psychotherapy, as well as in decision-making and stimulating teamwork in legal and business contexts. Naturally, from both a methodological point of view and the perspective of the aims of this practice, it is possible to identify some discontinuities *vis-à-vis* the ancient method.[7] However, the fundamental idea concerning the possibility of individual and collective betterment to be obtained by means of dialogical exchange amongst interlocutors remains the same.

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4 John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato. Complete Works* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1996).

5 The elenchus is the procedure that tests out the interlocutor's beliefs through cross-examination. Its main function is to liberate the interlocutors from false beliefs. See Laura Candiotto, "Purification through emotions. The role of shame in Plato's Sophist 230b4-e5," in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2017) http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1373338

6 Plato's Academy was presicely devoted to the philosophical education of the political leaders. As is well known, Plato argues in the *Republic* that it is the philosopher who should become king – or his counselor. Despite being elitist, this view elicits the idea that knowledge is a necessary requirement for the art of government, and that philosophy – in our case, the Socratic dialogue – is *the* method that permits to achieve this goal.

7 For a concise overview of the key characteristics and differences, see Laura Candiotto, "Socratic dialogue: a comparison between ancient and contemporary method," in M. Peters (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (*Singapore:* Springer, 2015 substantive revision), http://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_367-1. For an introduction to the different Socrates-inspired philosophical practices operating nowadays, see Michael Noah Weiss (ed.), *The Socratic Handbook* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2015), and Marìa Carmen Sègura (ed.), *El método socrático hoy. Para una enseñanza y práctica dialógica de la filosofía* [The Socratic method today. For a dialogical teaching and practice of philosophy] (Madrid: Escolar y mayo).

The German version of the ancient dialogue, formulated by Leonard Nelson and his collaborators is, in my opinion, the version that remains more faithful to the political objectives that were so important in ancient times, even though it presents different ontological and epistemological points of reference. In point of fact, Nelson is a neo-Kantian who integrates the Kantian a-priori and transcendental philosophy with the psychologism of Jacob Friederich Fries, assigning thus to the dialogical experience a foundational role in the formulation of judgments. The clear reference to Kant and Fries pertains to the epistemological feature of the method. For Socrates, the starting point of the dialogical inquiry is the analysis of examples. For Nelson, the dialogue means the assurance of a very phenomenological dimension to the inquiry, without Socrates' scepticism towards the exhaustiveness of the experience as a source of knowledge. Specifically, it is important for Nelson to ground the inquiry to the analysis of the judgments. As is well known, Kant has ascribed the role of critical examination of judgments to reason, since it is the faculty that judges the same faculty of thinking. But Kant's theory of judgment systematically embeds judgments within the metaphysics of transcendental idealism. Nelson, following the Kantian tradition, albeit with a different connotation, understands judgments as those psychological instances embraced by the epistemic agent that have the power to inform and constitute their ways of life. Moreover, following Fries, he roots the practice of inquiry, i.e., our main duty motivated by the interest in truth, in the self-confidence of reason (the principle of *Selbstvertrauen der Vernunft*) being able to achieve the exercise of criticism.

Starting from examples does not therefore imply the embracing of an empiricist account on knowledge, but instead implies the disclosure, analysis and challenges of those judgments that inform our daily life without our being aware of it. Moreover, starting from the experience means that, for Nelson, our knowledge is not simply propositional; a judgment is propositional, but analyzing the experience will provide us with the value of perceptual knowledge that is not propositional on its own although it is translatable in proposition. Therefore, following Fries, Nelson understands the production of knowledge as the synthetic unity of judgments and the immediate knowledge achievable through experience. In order to avoid the *regressus in infinitum*, judgments should be not grounded in prior judgements, but in something that is different from them, understood as non-intuitive immediate knowledge (*nicht anschaulich unmittelbare Erkenntniss*) of pure reason.[8] One element of interest in Nelson's theory, is that in order to achieve this kind of immediate knowledge, we should be engaged in dialogical inquiry, and not only, as per Fries, in introspection (*Selbstbeobachtung*). Thus, dialogical practice is a mediation or procedure that leads to non-intuitive immediate knowledge that Plato understood as the noetic realm of the ideas achievable through the long process of dianoetic inquiry.

In order to expound the characteristics of the German version of the Socratic method, a clarification of the historical circumstances underpinning its development is essential. This approach is vital since the German method emerged as a response to a specific historical situation, which required, according to Nelson and his disciples, the elaboration of appropriate strategies of intellectual resistance. Arguably, the political valence of the practice derives precisely from the Platonic account of the Socratic dialogue and not from the Kantian or Friesian heritage.

First, political activism: Nelson, disappointed by the neutral stance assumed by liberal youth movements during the First World War, initially founded the Society for the Study of Practical Philosophy (*Studiengesellschaft für praktische Philosophie*) in 1918, and later that year, the IJB (*Der Internationale Jugen-Bund*). These two groups aimed to create, within their society, ethical and political initiatives derived from Nelson and Fries' philosophies. Nelson recognized the primacy of reason and thus fought for a politics rooted in rights and centred in principles of equality and freedom. While never becoming a party, the IJB was exclusively connected to the left,

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8 For Fries, immediate knowledge is non-intuitive, and corresponds precisely to the Kantian meaning of perception. See Kelley L. Ross, "Non-Intuitive Immediate Knowledge," *Ratio*, Vol. XXIX No. 2 (1987), available online: http://www.friesian.com/immedi-1.htm

especially social democracy. In 1925, Nelson founded a party, the ISK (*Internationaler sozialisticher Kampfbund*), which, after his death in 1927, continued the resistance against National Socialism both within and outside Germany.

One of the achievements of the IJB was the foundation of the Political Philosophical Academy (PPA), which still exists today, whose goal was to educate future political leaders. This is the second aspect of Nelson's activity: the application of the Socratic method to educate future politicians. In 1923, Nelson founded a new school dedicated to the education of children and adults, the *Walkemühle*, directed by Minna Specht. The school, requisitioned by the SS in 1933, was transferred first to Denmark, then to England, and finally to Wales. During the years of exile, the activities of the school focused specifically on the education of children and developed configurations in the light of different facets of Nelson's theories. In fact, while Nelson can be considered as the thinker broadly at the origin of the German approach together with its philosophical justification, his disciples developed the method further through practice. Not only did they export the method outside of Germany, but they also ascribed to it a stable configuration. The method in question is nowadays equally taught in the education centres of PPA (Germany) and SFCP (England). In general terms, the Socratic dialogue was intended as a tool allowing participants to learn to think freely, detect errors and social scaffolding, while developing intellectual autonomy and rigour. The dialogue was meant to foster the experience of equality and freedom without focusing on the democratic principle of majority, which, according to Nelson, did not guarantee a real shared participation. The form of dialogue proposed by Nelson was rooted in an unwavering trust in reason (Kant) and in the possibility of achieving the knowledge of truth (Plato). However, the method was used not only for philosophical discussions or for conflict resolution, but also for didactic purposes and especially for lectures of mathematics and physics conducted by Heckmann.

The IJB, the PPA and the *Walkemühle* were also real experiences of communitarian life, characterized by a specific mode of existence, e.g., the refusal of luxury, an abandonment of the Church, abstinence from nicotine and tobacco, vegetarianism, manual work, and so on. In this perspective, the dialogue assumed the characters of a daily quest conducted in a community. The communitarian dimension was essential in considering the autonomy of thought, not as an individualistic endeavour but as a potentiality in the service of others and society.

After Nelson's death, Heckmann and Specht moved to Berlin where they published a journal – *der Funke* – which is well known for having publically promoted an appeal to resistance against National Socialism. After her years of exile, Specht dedicated a long time to editing the philosophical works of Nelson and some of his personal writings, hoping that such experiences could promote the establishment of schools able to offer a pedagogy different from that imposed by National Socialism.

History and Dialogue

Which amongst the aforementioned historical developments are the ones consistent with the ancient model? The ideas of "academy" and "communitarian life" in particular strongly resonate with the Platonic model of Socratic dialogues. On the occasion of the Pedagogical Society of Göttingen conference held on 11 December 1922,[9] Nelson frequently referred to the *Seventh Letter*. In fact, it is possible to find aspects of community life described by Plato in the *Seventh Letter* within the experiences of communitarian life that Nelson and his disciples promoted. The social dimension of the inquiry is not accessory: it is a necessary condition for the development of critical thinking, for the achievement of knowledge, and for the construction of a correct way of life that is consistent

9 Leonard Nelson, "*Die sokratische Methode. Vortrag, gehalten am 11. Dezember 1922 in der Pädagogischen Gesellschaft in Göttingen*" [The Socratic method. Lecture held on 11 December 1922 in the Pedagogical Society in Göttingen], 21–78.

with thought. Furthermore, the formation of future politicians, which constitutes one main task pursued by the Philosophical Political Academy, is obviously a clear reference to Plato's Academy, and it clearly illuminates the nexus existing – for Nelson – between philosophical and political education.

Philosophy as a lifestyle is not an abstract and disembodied activity of reason. On the contrary, philosophy as a lifestyle faces the present time and in this sense encounters and conflicts with history. The Socratic dialogue, specifically, establishes a relational dynamic with history since it assumes its engagement not only as proof of reality for philosophy, as Plato claimed, but als, as far as the German method is concerned, by elaborating an educational method in response to Nazism and by being presented as a tool to prevent new genocidal acts.

Political activism is an aspect that can be hardly detected in the ancient method, at least in the way it is currently understood, i.e., in connection with a political program formulated by associations that promote particular forms of resistance and struggle. Socrates' and Plato's politics (however relevant the term may be) is situated in the field of education and tends to overlap with philosophy itself. Arguably, political activism represents a factor specific to Nelson's method in its original formulation. This strong political dimension, as intended in its standard format, became less prominent in the works of his successors, who emphasized education and training without specifically considering the political significance of these activities. The possibility of spreading the method by means of written works, which, as previously mentioned, Heckmann and Specht undertook by creating a journal, can be considered as a key element to interpret the proliferation of the Socratic dialogue after Socrates' death. This parallel, however, may too easily smack of interpretative anachronism, which would in another venue require further specification.

Dialogue as a tool of resistance and education relates specifically to "history" as an awareness of the present and a responsibility for the future that motivates action. Therefore, facing history implies embracing the challenges of the present and responding to them through the tools at our disposal, in our case, philosophy and the Socratic dialogue. The notion of philosophy as way of life, which Pierre Hadot has depicted so well in the context of ancient Greece,[10] acquires in the German version of the Socratic dialogue a new and more politically engaged dimension. As such, philosophy is not only an embedded practice; it really meets its "history" and aspires to the transformation of its development. It is not by chance that Michel Foucault found in Socrates one of the heroes who had the courage to face the authorities with his philosophical life – the dialogue.[11] Similarly, unless there are clear differences between the Ancient and German dialogical methods, the common goal for philosophical practice may well be to face by means of the dialogue the history with all its figures of authority.

Socratic Dialogue as Political Action

How can philosophical dialogue contribute to the education of future leaders? And, more radically, to what extent can dialogical education be defined as political action? According to Paolo Dordoni,[12] Nelson's pedagogical project can be comprehended only by taking into account the role political activism plays therein. Dordoni is right to frame the German model on the basis of political activism. This said, I suggest developing another aspect that may seem less political but, in my opinion, explains better why dialogical education may serve as political action to face history. I am referring to the political value of emotions in dialogue. Specht's life experience is of the essence to

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[10] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. A. Davidson (Oxford: Wiley, 2016).

11 Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth. The Government of Self and Others II. Lectures at the College de France, 1983-1984*, translated by Graham Burchell (London-New York-Shangai: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

12 Paolo Dordoni, *Il dialogo socratico. Una sfida per un pluralismo sostenibile* [Socratic dialogue. A challenge for sustainable pluralism], (Milano: Apogeo, 2009), 37.

demonstrate how the ethics of care embedded in her way of promoting Socratic dialogue is the ground for a philosophical education as prevention of future genocides. During her years of resistance in exile, Specht has been doing politics through philosophical education and, in this perspective, her philosophy as way of life can be arguably considered as more Platonic than that of Nelson himself.

In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato describes the difficulties in engaging in correct forms of political action within a compromised socio-historical situation:

> As I observed these incidents and the men engaged in public affairs, the laws too and the customs, the more closely I examined them and the farther I advanced in life, the more difficult it seemed to me to handle public affairs aright. For it was not possible to be active in politics without friends and trustworthy supporters; and to find these ready to my hand was not an easy matter, since public affairs at Athens were not carried on in accordance with the manners and practices of our fathers; nor was there any ready method by which I could make new friends.[13]
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> Finally, it became clear to me, with regard to all existing communities, that they were one and all misgoverned. For their laws have got into a state that is almost incurable, except by some extraordinary reform with good luck to support it. And I was forced to say, when praising true philosophy that it is by this that men are enabled to see what justice in public and private life really is."[14]

Specht, similar to Plato, understood that in the context of National Socialism where direct avenues to political engagement were blocked, it was essential to create environments of friendship in which, thanks to philosophy, a new political generation could be forged. In this respect, she was true to Nelson, who, in agreement with the liberal Wilhelm Ohr, maintained the necessity to create educational-pedagogical communities for training a future political class. This view was also endorsed by Hermann Lietz who founded the first boarding schools, whose pedagogy remained authentically innovative until 1933. Moreover, after the fall of Nazism Specht created an educational model for those children who had experienced the horrors of the Second World War.

In this perspective, philosophical education does not only aim at training future politicians. Paraphrasing Specht, it also aims at building trust in humankind. It is not a didactic program reserved to a specific class of people (the future leaders), but a universal endeavour. Specht welcomed children of all ethnic origins and religions in her schools, notably – for the time – Germans, Jews, and Romani, with the aim at recognizing universal ties amongst individuals. Education is thus not only projected towards the future: it also aims at "repairing" the ills – in contemporary terms, "harm reduction" – caused by the Second World War. To achieve these ends, Specht focused, again, on establishing a philosophical community; hence, the creation of the Odenwald School, which run from 1946 to 1951. To broaden her scope of action and in addition to spreading Nelson's thought by publishing his works, Specht collaborated with UNESCO until 1959. Her politics, therefore, became a positive practice of normative elaboration, (the centrality of Plato's thought is evident here), striving to configure an educational context for the protection of children's rights. Building on these premises, we may arguably formulate the questions that orientated Specht's life in the post-war period as follows: "How to educate after totalitarianism?" and "How to regain trust in reason and in the capacity to grasp the truth after the horrors of the Second World War?" These two questions, albeit simplifying and generic, call to mind Hans Jonas'

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13 Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 325 c4–d2.
14 Ibid., 326 a2–6.

metaphysical dilemma: "How is it possible to think God after Auschwitz?"[15] Specht's answer was a continuous commitment to philosophical education, based on the firm belief that a better future could only be rooted in the education of a new generation. For Specht, philosophical education was to be rooted in the dialogue, intended as a philosophical method that allowed believing in one's own potential through collaboration with others.[16] Therefore, Specht's experience provides evidence of the transformative power of philosophical dialogue as an educational device, both for those practicing it and for the context in which it is practiced.

The Dialogue's Powers

Dialogue is a world-transformative action.[17] Communicative action, by affecting public opinion, can be configured as the starting point of a possible political transformation. The work carried out in philosophical quest brings an answer to the need for ethical, political and social change – a change that is possible only through a conceptual transformation involving single citizens who are placed in relation with each other by establishing constructive communicative-dialogical contexts. However, how can the dialogue have an effect on power?

A theoretical foundation for the link between philosophical education based on dialogue and political intervention can be traced in different discourse theories. In my opinion, Jürgen Habermas' accounts clearly depict what is achievable through the practice of the Socratic dialogue.[18] Habermas replies to the question about the power of communicative agency by taking the example of a hydraulic system based on water locks.[19] The transition of communication and decisions takes place through a periphery-centre channel based on the construction of public opinion. As in a hydraulic system, there are locks that allow or prevent the passage of communicative fluxes from the periphery to the centre.

Civil society is composed of associations, corporations and movements that intercept and intensify, more or less spontaneously, problematic social situations and transmit them to the political public sphere. However, this transmission of knowledge does not take place at an institutional level only but also in more spontaneous forms that shape public opinion: dialogical interactions on a train, in the waiting room at a hospital, in the supermarket, or in immaterial contexts such as blogs and social networks on the web. Communication is enacted by both active social actors and those who listen and are influenced by what they listen to.

The informal knowledge constituted in these contexts, if it gains momentum, can open with its pressure – e.g., concrete demonstrations as well as appeals launched via the web – with the aforementioned hydraulic locks influencing the next level of the hydraulic system. The communication system between centre and periphery, however, is constituted by fluxes moving not only from the latter towards the former, but also in reverse. Communication from the centre to the periphery is often more influential as it is facilitated by the use of more powerful means of communication. Unfortunately, various conditioning messages that weaken the free-thinking

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15 Hans Jonas, "*Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz. Eine jüdische Stimme*" [The Concept of God after Auschwitz. A Jewish Voice], in Fritz Stern, Hans Jonas, *Reflexionen finsterer Zeit* [Reflections of dark time] (Mohr: Tübingen, 1984).

16 Minna Specht, *Education for Confidence. A School in Exile*. See also Rene Saran, Barbare Neisser, eds., *Enquiring Minds. Socratic Dialogue in Education*, (London: Trentham Books, 2004).

17 Patricia Shipley, Heidi Mason, eds., *Ethics and Socratic Dialogue in Civil Society* (Frankfurt: Dipa Verlag, 2004); Dries Boele, "The 'Benefits' of a Socratic Dialogue, Or: Which Results Can We Promise?", *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*, Vol. XVII, no 3, 1997, 48–70.

18 Jürgen Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze* [Between naturalism and religion. Philosophical Essays] (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2005); Jürgen Habermas, *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln* [Moral consciousness and communicative action] (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983).

19 Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaates* [Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy] (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1992).

capability of single citizens follow this trajectory. From this perspective, the periphery-centre fluxes seem weak and unable to produce effective socio-political changes; however, it is arguably essential to reinforce them, precisely for this reason, by creating communicative and dialogical contexts in which individuals can experience the critical thinking that characterizes philosophical inquiry. This is precisely what Nelson and his disciples attempted to accomplish. In Habermassian terms, we could say that, insofar as the flows coming from the centre tend to condition individuals and to hinder their capacity of critical thinking confining them to a solitude stemming from fear of the other, it is crucial to work on the pressure and pushes operating from the periphery towards the centre and to educate people in order for them to become main actors in such propulsive movements.

In a theory of communicative action, those participating in the dialogue demonstrate their willingness to engage in a critical revision of the traditions transmitted by their socio-cultural background. In reality, however, this operation clashes with habits that they unavoidably embody, often unconsciously. Frequently, prejudices can be so rooted in the identitarian structure and language of the participants that they are not only un-removable, they are also virtually undetectable. The openness or sincerity representing an essential condition for an effective relational communication can be thus compromised from the outset.

In this perspective, it is necessary to emphasize the crucial importance and actuality of the Socratic method, which implies, first and foremost, the unmasking of conceptual errors and conditionings that disempower the interlocutors. Nelson intends philosophical teaching to be a practice capable of weakening those influences hindering the development of philosophical knowledge in students and that can also reinforce those supporting such a development. Nelson's conception does not thus oppose in principle the exercise of influence on the learner: he is fully aware of the pedagogical antinomy that constitutes the Socratic method itself, whereby freedom is "forced" upon the interlocutors. The Socratic method is, however, a form of conditioning that produces freedom of thought rather than dogmatism (characterizing the conditioning of power).

The Politics of Care

Specht's work provides evidence about the dialogical effectiveness in the establishment of an empathic context for the philosophical inquiry. For Specht, the other's needs and emotions should be recognized as a crucial component of the experience that will be further analyzed through the critiques of judgments, in Nelson's terms. In the meantime, the relationship of reciprocal trust can be performed within the practice. This affective environment needs to be created through continuous and daily practices of care for the others, and for the environment in which they live.

Therefore, experiencing the Socratic dialogue from this embodied perspective implies the recognition of the affective dimension of the experience that is at the basis of the philosophical inquiry. More specifically, the quest that runs ~~is moved~~ by love and care for the others prompts participants not only to be more motivated ~~in their search~~, but also to establish affective relations that will nurture the practice itself. Specht's experience is similar to what Martha Nussbaum has depicted as "cultivating humanity." In actual fact, this practice involves not only sympathy, imagination and respect, but something closer to love and compassion. For Nussbaum those are the emotions that we should nurture in order to construct our humanity,[20] which the Socratic dialogue allows in my understanding of Specht's experience.

The community of inquiry, in which individuals think with-one-another (*miteinanderdenken,* in Heckmann's words[21]), comes thus to define a central educational task. The

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20 Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions. Why Love matters for Justice* (New York and London: Belknap Press, 2013).
21 Heckmann, Gustav, *Das sokratische Gespräch*, *Erfharungen in philosophischen Hochschulseminaren* [Socratic dialogue, experiences in high school classes]. See also Detlef Horster, *Das Sokratische Gespräch in Theorie und Praxis* [Socratic Dialogue in Theory and Practice] (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1994).

Socratic dialogue becomes a device in which the youths can think alone (i.e., independently) while not being alone. With Specht's experience, philosophy extends its power as political action by shaping a specific form of dialogical education.

The central role Specht ascribes to emotions – in particular, love and vulnerability – and the specific way of life experienced in her "schools of life" were the keys to pursuing an effective dialogue amongst the children. By encouraging a sense of shared responsibility for human care and building trust in humanity, this kind of Socratic dialogue was understood as a key practice in reaching a real intercultural dialogue as a response to and prevention of the hatred perpetrated by the Nazi power.

By emphasizing the value of emotions in dialogue, this model aims to nurture the affective intentionality embodied and embedded in the collective process of questing.[22] The self acquires thus an ethical horizon within a context of transformation. In this perspective, emotions are not to be intended as merely private phenomena, but as those intersubjective powers that are at the basis of the political valence of the ethics of care and of the dialogue as a world-transformative action. Affectivity constitutes the identity of the agent by shaping the relational nexus with the others and the context. Caring for the quality of relations also involves the promotion of a politics of care since, as Fiona Mackay has argued,[23] the politics should be grounded in the same acts of loving care for the others.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to demonstrate how the fulcrum of the relation between the Socratic dialogue and politics can be individuated in everyday philosophical practice, pursued in the social dimension of relationships, and intended as an educational device that aspires for the transformation of the epistemic agent and of her/his environment. I maintain that this aspect, notwithstanding the differences referable to their historical context of development, is central to both the ancient method and the German version of the Socratic dialogue.

For Plato, the task of education is not only to purify one from the influence of "bad teachers"; it is also to form worthy human beings (the project of the Academy) and right laws (the project that accompanied Plato into his old age and led him to write the *Laws*). *Paideia* was in fact the lodestar that had always guided Plato's questing – a questing that unfolded as a continuous definition of the practice of philosophy, aiming at providing an alternative to the politics of his days and educating a new humanity.

The German method can be considered as the worthier heir amongst the proliferation of practices inspired by the Socratic dialogue, especially if we take as the main parameter of evaluation the existential nexus connecting philosophical dialogue, education and politics. The analysis of the figure of Minna Specht, in particular, can be considered at the same time as the more concrete exemplification of the existence of this nexus and as an expression of its effectiveness in facing its history.

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22 Jan Slaby's account on affective intentionality emphazises how the affective world-directed intentionality is essentially bodily. This idea, which is crucial for the contemporary debates in philosophy of emotions and affective studies, seems to be equally relevant for depicting Specht's experience. Specht, despite avoiding the recognition of the value of the affective environment where the philosophical inquiry took place, employed specific educational methods to create a proper setting for the inquiry, starting from bodily awareness. In this way, the experience that is at the ground of every philosophical analysis, in Nelson's and Fries' terms, is the embodied, embedded, enactive and affective experience of the student. See Jan Slaby, "Affective intentionality and the feeling body", *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 2008, Vol.7(4), 429-444.

23 In line with Gilligan's approach about the differences between justice and ethics of care. Fiona Mackay, 2001. *Love and Politics. Women Politicians and the Ethics of Care*. (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001); Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development,* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).

Biography

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